



Heavy shelling rocks Tigray; Ethiopia steps up offensive

1,300 'test positive' in UK's COVID testing error



PARIS: Demonstrators rally near the Place de la Republique in Paris yesterday during a protest against the 'global security' draft law, which (Article 24) would criminalize the publication of images of on-duty police officers with the intent of harming their "physical or psychological integrity". —AFP

France reels from police brutality

Video footage show officers beating and racially abusing a black man

PARIS: Dozens of rallies were planned yesterday against a new French law that would restrict sharing images of police, only days after the country was shaken by footage showing officers beating and racially abusing a black man. The case shocked France with celebrities and politicians alike condemning the officers' actions, and has brought debate over President Emmanuel Macron's law to boiling point.

Macron on Friday called the incident an "unacceptable attack" and asked the government to come up with proposals to "fight against discrimination". One of the most controversial elements of the new law is Article 24, which would criminalize the publication of images of on-duty police officers with the intent of harming their "physical or psychological integrity".

It was passed by the National Assembly last week—although it is awaiting Senate approval—provoking protests across France. Rally organizers are calling for the article to be withdrawn, claiming that it contradicts the fundamental freedoms of the French republic. "This bill aims to undermine the freedom of the press, the freedom to inform and be informed, the freedom of expression," one of protest organizers said. Trade unions are expected to join the demonstrations, with members of the yellow vests—whose sometimes violent protests in 2018 and 2019 shook the country—also expected.

Fundamental freedoms

In Paris, the authorities had demanded that organizers limit the rally to a single location, but on Friday evening officials authorized a march. And in a sign that the government

could be preparing to backtrack, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced Friday that he would appoint a commission to redraft Article 24. Under the article, offenders could be sentenced to up to a year in jail, and fined 45,000 euros (\$53,000) for sharing images of police officers. The government says the provision is intended to protect officers from doxing and online abuse, but critics say it is further evidence of the Macron administration's slide to the right.

But media unions say it could give police a green light to prevent journalists and social media users from documenting abuses. They point to the case of music producer Michel Zecler, whose racial abuse and beating at the hands of police was recorded by CCTV and later published online, provoking widespread criticism of the officers' actions. In another instance, journalists on the ground at a French migrant camp in Paris witnessed and recorded police brutality on Monday as the area was cleared. Laurent Fabius, a former prime minister who heads the Constitutional Council, said yesterday that the top court would review the law.

"Freedom of opinion, freedom of the press and freedom of demonstration are, for the Council, fundamental freedoms. We will see, after the final vote in parliament, what will be the exact content of this article," he said. In a letter seen by AFP, Paris police chief Didier Lallemand wrote to officers to tell them: "In the coming days, the coming weeks... there's no doubt you will face difficulty, doubt, even anger and fear." But he insisted that he could "count on the integrity, sense of honor and ethics" in the force.

Protests over police brutality have already taken place

weeks of tough restrictions, Europe remains at the heart of the pandemic, recording more cases than the United States in the past week. Until recently, Germany's relative success in containing the virus had offered some sense of hope, with authorities putting in place some precautions that still allowed life to carry on almost as normal. However, its measured approach has failed during the second wave, endangering the health of Europe's biggest economy and weighing on the mood as the northern hemisphere heads into the winter holidays. Germany's Robert Koch Institute recorded more than 22,000 new daily cases on Friday, pushing the overall total beyond the one-million mark. More worryingly, the number of Covid-19 patients in intensive care has soared from around 360 in early October to more than 3,500 last week.

LA restrictions

The United States surpassed 13 million total cases on Friday—the world's highest—and officials were concerned whether gatherings on Thursday for the Thanksgiving holiday would further worsen the situation in the coming weeks. The virus clouded the traditional "Black Friday" shopping day, but experts were expecting strong online sales.

Worry over the virus's rapid spread led Los Angeles county to announce a temporary ban on gatherings of people from different households, with religious services and protests exempt. The order affecting the United States' second-largest city will take effect Monday and last at least three weeks, until December 20, the county's public health department said. California last week imposed a night-time curfew across much of the state.

Sports was also affected in the United States. The NFL postponed a pivotal matchup between the unbeaten Pittsburgh Steelers and the Baltimore Ravens to Tuesday because of a COVID-19 outbreak among Ravens players. Further north in



PARIS: This video grab shows CCTV camera footage producer Michel Zecler being beaten up by police officers at the entrance of a music studio in the 17th arrondissement of Paris. —AFP

elsewhere in country. In the southern city of Toulouse demonstrators took to the streets on Friday evening brandishing placards with slogans such as "police everywhere, justice nowhere". In the western city of Nantes, police said around 3,500 rallied, while organizers put the crowd at 6,000-7,000. Montpellier city officials said 3,800 people were demonstrating yesterday, more than double the number who attended a march a week ago, while organizers said there were 5,000 people. —AFP

Canada, whose largest city Toronto is under lockdown, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that a general who led NATO's mission in Iraq as well as Canadian troops in Afghanistan and Bosnia would spearhead a gigantic vaccination drive. "This will be the biggest immunization in the history of the country," Trudeau said.

Lockdown fatigue

The pandemic is spreading fastest in Asia and Latin America, and is up by a worrying 113 percent over the week in Mexico. Globally, more than 1.4 million deaths and 61 million infections have been officially recorded, although the real numbers are unknown since testing and reporting methods vary greatly. With the virus on the march and the rollout of the first vaccines not expected until next month, much of the world faces a gloomy winter under more lockdowns, with an accompanying increase in economic anxiety and mental strain.

Lockdown fatigue is spreading even as governments unfurl new measures to save healthcare systems from collapse. One hairdresser in northern England has become a cause celebre among social media libertarians after stacking up fines totaling £17,000 (\$23,000), invoking the Magna Carta of 1215. Among others invoking Magna Carta to stay open have been a tattoo parlor in Bristol, western England, and a children's soft-play centre in Liverpool, in the northwest.

Law enforcers have taken a dim view, meting out fines and reminding all businesses that legislation of this year, not 800 years ago, is relevant and binding. Nations are now trying to gauge how people, exhausted by one of the most traumatic years in generations, can enjoy a small holiday break without making things worse. Playing it safe, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has called for all EU resorts to be closed until January 10, making Switzerland—which is outside the bloc and is staying open—the go-to destination for ski fans. —AFP

In European first, Iran envoy faces trial over foiled bomb plot

ANTWERP: An Iranian diplomat and three other Iranians went on trial in Belgium on Friday accused of planning to bomb a meeting of an exiled opposition group in France in 2018, the first time an EU country has put an Iranian official on trial for terrorism. Belgian prosecutors charged Vienna-based diplomat Assadollah Assadi and the three others with plotting an attack on a rally of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI).

The rally's keynote address was given by US President Donald Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani. Assadi, who was arrested while on holiday in Germany and handed over to Belgium, is refusing to appear in court and did not attend the first day of the trial in Antwerp; he has not commented on the charges.

"My client asked me to represent him today, he let me know he has the fullest respect for these judges but as he considers that he should benefit from immunity, they are not allowed to judge him," his lawyer Dimitri de Beco said. Assadi was the third counselor at Iran's embassy in Vienna. French officials have said he was in charge of intelligence in southern Europe and was acting on orders from Tehran. The Islamic Republic has repeatedly dismissed the charges, calling the attack allegations a "false flag" stunt by the NCRI, which it considers a terrorist group.

The trial is expected to continue next week, with a possible verdict later this month or in early January, lawyers said. Assadi warned authorities in March of possible retaliation by unidentified groups if he is found guilty, according to a police document obtained by Reuters. Authorities say the attack was thwarted by a coordinated operation between French, German and Belgian security services. Two of Assadi's suspected accomplices were arrested in Belgium with the explosive TATP and a detonator. Their lawyers said on Friday that neither had any intention to kill.

Lawyers representing participants of the 2018 rally, who are a civil party to the Belgian prosecution, have argued that diplomatic immunity cannot be used as a cover to carry out a terrorist attack, which carries a maximum 20-year prison term. "I think the words 'brave little Belgium' are entirely appropriate today," said Rik Vanreusel, a lawyer for the civil party. "We are one of the only countries that has dared to put such rather politically sensitive matters in a proper perspective."

Following a 2015 accord between Iran and world powers to curb Tehran's nuclear programme, the European Union has sought closer diplomatic and economic relations with Tehran, but says it cannot turn a blind eye to human rights abuses or terrorism. France has said Iran's intelligence ministry was behind the 2018 plot and it expelled an Iranian diplomat. European countries have blamed Iran for other suspected moves against dissidents, including two killings in the Netherlands in 2015 and 2017 and a foiled assassination in Denmark. The Islamic Republic has denied involvement. —Reuters

Parts of Europe reopen, LA sees new virus curbs

PARIS: Parts of Europe will reopen stores yesterday in time for the holiday season after progress in containing the coronavirus, but Los Angeles will halt nearly all gatherings with the pandemic surging across the United States. Most countries hope to ease their virus rules for Christmas and New Year, allowing families a respite before bracing for what the world hopes is one last wave of restrictions until a clutch of promising new vaccines kick in.

Stores lifted their shutters in France yesterday, while Poland's shopping centers will also reopen. Belgium is to allow shops to reopen from December 1, but keep the current semi-lockdown in place possibly until mid-January. The move mirrors similar easing in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The Italian government partially lifted restrictions in Lombardy and Piedmont in the north, and Calabria in the south from today, changing their alert levels from red to orange.

And Ireland has also announced a staggered easing of restrictions to allow some businesses to reopen and for families to gather ahead of Christmas. Speaking in a televised address, Irish Taoiseach Micheal Martin said the upcoming festive period "cannot and will not be the kind of Christmas we are used to" but added the easing of restrictions would offer "some respite from the hardships of 2020 and in particular, the last six weeks".

Germany, once a beacon of hope in Europe's coronavirus nightmare, logged more than one million cases on Friday, while Russia asked India to help mass produce its controversial Sputnik vaccine. Although the virus spread is slowing thanks to